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Rather than being viewed as a reading skill, comprehension is viewed as inferring the task of the writer or as discerning the ends and means of a discourse. Inferring the writer's task is to reason backwards from the product to the questions with which he may have started. Discerning ends and means is to view what is described, argued, or explained; to see order, language, and structure. Many skills are needed to comprehend, and these should meet certain evaluative criteria relating to their validity, inclusiveness, coherence, and brevity. No hierarchical sequence is needed for teaching comprehension skills, but teachers should be able to select those skills which are needed by their students. A list of skills, and explanations of them, is attached. (MD)

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READING COMPREHENSION: INFERRING THE TASK OF THE WRITER

My starting point is the simple notion that "reading comprehension" means understanding what is read. I limit the discussion of what is read to everyday exposition and argument--to the discourse of reports, editorials, and articles written for a general audience. For purposes of discussion, I set aside matters of word perception, vocabulary, and rate, even though these necessarily are involved in comprehension. Essentially, I am presenting a view of comprehension as a set of skills unified by a principle of order.

Because confusion abounds in complicated fields, I must clear the ground before attempting to move forward.

Confusion of two kinds must be cleared away. One is between comprehension and related matters. A second is between the ends and means of a piece of writing. Drawing the necessary distinctions may dispel confusion.

To distinguish comprehension from different things, I cite four kinds of statements; each has been called a skill of comprehension; but I hope to show that it is actually something else.

One example cited sometimes as a skill of comprehension is the ability to answer questions stated or implied in a passage. As that statement stands, however, no one can tell what skill is intended because no one can tell what single skill or what combination of skills a reader must use to answer whatever the question may be. Here comprehension is confused with what seems to be a nebulously-stated activity for learning it or else a vaguely-stated example of its use.

A second kind of statement sometimes called a skill of comprehension is the ability to assess the authority of the writer. A similar statement refers to the distinguishing of fact from opinion. The two abilities, though obviously useful and valuable, are matters not of comprehension, but of general knowledge; and these have uses apart from reading and listening. Here comprehension is confused with general knowledge and its use.

The ability to apply ideas and to integrate them with one's past experience has also been called a skill of comprehension.

Obviously, this third example is rather a use of comprehension or a justification for teaching it. However that may be, the application and the integration of ideas (whatever all this may mean) follow the comprehension of them. We may say the same of another familiar statement: "Ability to follow directions."

A fourth example has been stated as the ability to give meaning to units of increasing size. The following set of terms says the same thing: "sentence comprehension," "paragraph comprehension," "article comprehension".

Here we find two sources of difficulty: First, the meaning of the word "comprehension" is itself nebulous. Second, the statements seem to imply that differing lengths of what is read require differences in skill of comprehension. However, logic and experience suggests that the length of a selection does not determine the skills needed for understanding it. One confusion here is between length of material to be understood and specific skills of comprehension.

From this brief survey we infer that, typically, writers on reading confuse comprehension with learning activities, with justification for teaching, with general knowledge, and with vague and dubious notions of the process itself.

Another kind of confusion beclouds the discourse further: that between the ends and means of what is read. The usual book and article on the teaching of reading and writing reveal confusion

or unawareness of that distinction. Perhaps these writings reveal notions that the distinction doesn't matter much. I hope to show, however, that the general ignoring of the distinction hinders rational instruction.

To distinguish ends from means of what is read, I begin by assuming that a piece of writing is an example of communication. The purpose of communication is to produce effects upon readers and audiences. The purpose of a piece of writing, therefore, is to produce effects upon readers. The effects typical to exposition and argument are to inform, to persuade, and to entertain. A piece of writing may seek to produce within its reader any one of these effects or others, and it may seek to produce any combination of effects.

It follows, then, that the purpose of a piece of writing is not to say something and not to express ideas. Rather, what is said or expressed in a piece of writing is a means to the producing of effects.

Put another way, what a writer expresses is not really a purpose but a means.

An illustration may clarify this and related matters. George Orwell's essay "Visiting a Coal Mine" consists mainly of a description. To say that the purpose of that essay is to describe is to confuse ends and means. Part of the purpose is to inform the reader of the inhuman conditions under which coal miners work. A second and ultimate purpose is to persuade the reader toward

moral indignation. Thus, to say that a description necessarily implies the purpose of informing is to oversimplify. And it is similarly misleading to assume in general a simple one-to-one correspondence between what is expressed and what purpose the expression serves.

Nevertheless, it is fitting and proper for a writer to begin with such words as "The purpose of this article is to describe..." or "....to show...," or "....to clarify...". These conventional expressions, although appropriate, mask a deeper distinction of ends and means. The distinction is indispensable to adequate comprehension. To be inveigled by the commonly-held notion that the conveying of ideas is a purpose of a discourse is to be a victim of a fundamental delusion.

The kinds of confusion I have noted affect instruction adversely. No one can teach comprehension well when he doesn't know the difference between comprehension and the things with which it is confused and when he doesn't know the relations between a piece of writing and its purposes. A big reason why anyone so confused cannot teach well is that his misconceptions prevent him from formulating defensible questions. For example, consider such familiar questions as these: "What is the purpose of this paragraph?" and "What is the author's purpose in that article?" Only the student who possesses clear and defensible ideas of <u>purpose</u> can give clear and defensible responses.

There is a single aim for teaching comprehension, and that is to help people achieve whatever goals they may have for reading. To achieve those goals, they need to acquire certain skills. No one can predict all the goals. Therefore, the set of skills should comprise an exhaustive list.

The discussion to this point and the practical conditions of teaching suggest that the set of skills for comprehension meet four criteria:

(1) One may be called validity, which means that the list be useful in guiding the reader to discern the ends and means of a discourse and in guiding the teacher to select proper learning activities.

(2) A second criterion may be called inclusiveness, which means two things: that the list include all the important skills, either by explicit specification or by implication, and that the list refer to all lengths of exposition and argument. No matter what the length of the discourse, the skills for reading it are essentially the same.

(3) Coherence, a third criterion, means that the list comprise a related set in the sense that the skills help the reader identify the parts of the discourse. The parts must be related to the whole. Without this part-whole relationship, our discussion of parts would become a discussion of separate topics.

(4) A fourth criterion, brevity, means just that: The familiar lengthy list of skills defeats its own purpose.

Such a list may be derived from an analysis of what writers do when they write, for comprehension may be viewed as a process of inferring the task of the writer. Whenever a writer is at work constructing a discourse intended to communicate, he necessarily faces and resolves certain problems. His awareness of these problems and of his solution to them may be conscious or unconscious. However that may be, the necessary problems may be formulated as such questions as these: "What effects am I after?" "Who is the reader?" The two questions relate to ends. All others relate to means. Questions of means refer to the piece of writing itself--to its content, organization, language, and, in general, to what is expressed. In some form or other the writer must ask himself: "What, essentially, am I describing, asserting, or arguing?" In what order shall I present the details? What shall I emphasize and not emphasize? How shall I represent myself to my reader?"

It is such questions as these that the writer faces and resolves. His own formulation of the problems, his degree of awareness of them, his habits of work are not at issue here: the individual predilections of writers are a matter of psychology. The concern here is with ultimate principles of order, and these are independent of their use by particular writers.

Inferring the task of the writer implies a process of reasoning backward from the writer's finished product to inferring his solutions to the kinds of questions just cited.

The handout presents a list of comprehension skills that have

been derived from earlier work on the skills of the writer. Of the nine skills listed, the first two concern ends: the desired effects and the perceived reader. Neither desired effect nor perceived reader can be part and parcel of the piece of writing. It is in the nature of things that the purpose of a thing is not part of the thing itself. The purpose of a chair is sitting, but sitting is not part of the chair. The purpose of a Chevrolet is transportation, but transportation is not part of a Chevrolet. The purpose of an argument or exposition viewed as communication is to produce certain effects upon certain readers. But neither desired effect nor perceived reader are part of the written discourse.

The discourse and its parts may be viewed as what is described, argued, or explained, the order in which details are presented, the language, and the rest. What is in the piece of writing itself is justified as means to the producing of certain effects upon certain readers. Therefore all discussion of the discourse itself is properly related to the producing of desired effects. Otherwise the discussion of what is in the piece of writing becomes a pedantic exercise on isolated topics rather than a coherent inquiry into what is read. It is not enough to teach how to identify organization, kind of language, and how the writer represents himself to his reader. The parts of a piece of writing are properly there because they contribute to its purpose. A set of comprehension skills are unified by the relations between intended effects and the parts of what is read. That relationship is a principle of order for unifying any set of comprehension skills.

To conclude. Comprehension may be viewed as inferring the task of the writer or as discerning the ends and means of a discourse. Both formulations mean the same thing. The list of skills I have presented is probably complete within that view of comprehension.

Because the purpose of discourse is seldom viewed as means to the producing of effects, the teaching of that concept usually requires much specific work. That concept, furthermore, underlies all the other skills and the relations among them.

The skills presented are within the range of experience of anyone who can profit from specific instruction in the reading and writing of exposition and argument, from the elementary school to the college. There is no logical or empirical reason to suppose that the teaching of this set of skills implies a sequential hierarchy. The same set of skills apply equally to the fifth grader and to the intelligent college graduate, to the child in P.S. 201 and to the child at Groton. The task for teaching is that of selecting differing means suited to differing learners, for everyone must learn to comprehend.

READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS FOR EXPOSITORY AND ARGUMENTATIVE PROSE

Given a selection of expository or argumentative prose of any length:

1. Infer and state its purpose or purposes.

   We assume that a piece of writing is an example of communication and that the purpose of communication is to produce effects upon readers or audiences. Therefore the effects to be produced upon the reader are the purposes of a piece of writing. It follows, then, that for a piece of writing the following are not purposes: to express ideas, to communicate, to say something. It follows, too, that whatever the purpose may be, it is properly expressed as effects upon readers. Effects typical to non-fiction prose are to inform, to persuade, and to entertain. Purpose may include any combination of these effects or others.

2. Infer the perceived reader and assumptions about him that the writer makes.

   From the piece of writing infer what the writer assumes the reader knows, does not know, or needs to know. Infer what the writer assumes will appeal to, or arouse, the reader.

Like the first two items, each of the following is also a task of comprehension. But each item that follows must be related to purpose, as we have defined that term in Item 1, and to the perceived reader, for it is upon him that the effects are to be produced.

3. Identify and restate the main argument or explanation.

   State what, essentially, is argued, asserted, described, explained, claimed, and so on.

4. Identify and restate the details--thoughts, facts, opinions, reasons, examples, and so on.

5. Identify and describe the sequence in which the details are presented.

6. Infer and describe scale or the amount and kind of detail allotted to the various parts.

7. Describe the uses of language--words, sentences, diction, varieties of usage, and so on.

8. Infer and describe how the writer represents himself to his reader.

9. Infer the point of view that the writer conveys toward his audience, his topic, and himself.

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2. Infer the perceived reader and assumptions about him that the writer makes.

   From the piece of writing infer what the writer assumes the reader knows, does not know, or needs to know. Infer what the writer assumes will appeal to, or arouse, the reader.

   The first two items refer to ends. The items that follow refer to the means, which is the piece of writing itself and its parts. If the inquiry into a piece of writing is to be unified and coherent, the parts must always be related to ends. Otherwise the discussion of parts (Items 3 to 9 below) will be a pedantic discussion of isolated topics rather than rational inquiry into the ends and means of what is read.

3. Identify and restate the main argument or explanation.

   State what, essentially, is argued, asserted, described, explained, claimed, and so on.

4. Identify and restate the details--thoughts, facts, opinions, reasons, examples, and so on.

5. Identify and describe the sequence in which the details are presented.

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